

CHALLENGES TO THE CHURCHES IN ASIA TODAY*

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ABSTRACT

Georg Evers, in “Challenges to the Churches in Asia Today,” begins with a brief overview of the situation of the Asian churches before Vatican II. He then discusses the significance of the Council for the Asian churches with special attention to the founding of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. He describes the main characteristics of the Catholic churches in Asia. In the main theme of his talk, “The Challenges to the Asian Churches,” Evers presents prophetic figures who have inspired the churches to radical Christian commitment and invites us to examine contemporary secular and theological challenges.

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Introduction

My personal competence – if I may claim to have any – results from 22 years of having been on the Asia Desk of the Institute of Missiology, Missio in Aachen, Germany. In this capacity I observed developments in the Asian churches with a special focus on contextual theologies, the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue within Asian theology for our bibliographical journal *Theology in Context*. For more than ten years, I took part in the annual meetings of the Theological Advisory Commission, now called Office of Theological Concerns of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), first as an observer and later as a resource person. My extensive traveling in Asia brought me into contact – however short the time – with most Asian countries and the local Catholic churches there.

Briefly, I'll give you an overview of the structure of my talk which is part of the modules of the East Asian Pastoral Institute's (EAPI) general theme: *40 Years After Vatican II*.

First, I start with looking back at the *Situation of the Asian Churches before Vatican II* (Part I). This I do by characterizing briefly the general situation of the Church in some Asian countries and reviewing the state of theology at the time.

Second, I deal with the *Significance of Vatican II for the Asian Churches* (Part II) by mentioning some contributions by Asian bishops to Vatican II. Then I refer to the founding of the FABC and describe the implementation of Vatican II in some Asian countries.

Third, I give a brief description of *Some Characteristics of the Catholic Churches in Asia* (Part III).

The fourth part deals with the main theme of my talk, namely: *The Challenges to the Asian Churches*, by presenting some charismatic and prophetic figures from the Asian churches (Part IV).

Finally, the fifth part will briefly sum up *The Secular and Theological Challenges of Today*.

The Situation of the Asian Churches before Vatican II

A Brief Look at some Asian Countries

Vatican II marked a caesura in recent church history and for the Asian churches it was the beginning of a new way of being Church, of celebrating the liturgy, of doing theology, and simply living the faith. Before the Council, the

churches in Asia were still mostly “mission territories,” entrusted to different foreign missionary orders and congregations, but not yet local churches in their own right.

If we look at the situation of the Catholic Church in different Asian countries at the beginning of Vatican II in the 1960s, we can detect several common traits.

There is first the endeavor to respond to the political, economic, cultural, and social changes in Asia after the end of the Pacific War in 1945, which signaled not only the defeat of Imperial Japan, but also meant the end of the colonial enterprise of European nations and the emergence of independent national states in the region. For the missionary activities of the Catholic Church new opportunities opened up in some areas, and new dangers and obstacles in others.

In the early years after the end of the war, in which Japan was defeated, Asia was seen as a prosperous and promising mission territory, and thousands of European and American missionaries flocked there to start schools, universities and engage in social activities to gain converts to Christianity. The strong attraction Christianity had for the Japanese did not last long and the number of baptisms soon dropped.

In China, however, foreign missionaries were expelled from the country after the Communists under Mao Zedong had won the civil war against the forces of the Guomindang under Jiang Jieshi in 1949. The Catholic Church in China became isolated after its ties with Rome and the Pope were interrupted. No Chinese bishop from the mainland was allowed to take part in the preparations and in the actual sessions of the Council. The Catholics in mainland China had to wait until the beginning of the 1990s, before they got the opportunity to learn about the many changes Vatican II had brought. It was only then that they stopped having the liturgy of the Mass in Latin and began using Chinese as liturgical language.

During the Korean civil war (1950–1953), the Catholic Church in the North was completely destroyed, whereas the number of Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, dramatically grew in the South.

Vietnam, too, became involved in a civil war during which most Catholics fled the Communist-ruled North and settled in the South, where the Catholic Church under the leadership of the Catholic president Ngo Dinh Diem (1955–1963) maintained a strong position.

On the Indian subcontinent, the Catholic Church lived through the turmoil and the violence accompanying the partition of the country. The Catholics in the newly founded Union of India, as well as in the new state of Pakistan, tried to rid themselves of the stigma of having been in an often close relationship with the colonial masters and had to prove that they were loyal and patriotic citizens.

In newly independent Sri Lanka, the Catholic Church became involved in a heavy conflict with the government which had confiscated all Catholic schools.

The State of Theology in Asia before Vatican II

Before Vatican II, in all Asian mission countries Catholic theology was taught nearly exclusively in regional or diocesan major seminaries or in training institutions of religious orders. The professors teaching in these institutions were recruited mostly from among the foreign European or American missionaries. The theology taught, often still in Latin, and only rarely in the vernacular, consisted mainly of translations of scholastic theological treatises in vogue at the time, and did not make any reference to the specific religious and cultural context of the country. The first timid attempts to take the context into account in theological reflection were then still called by the technical term of “accommodation,” a concept, first developed by Jesuit missionaries in India and China during the 17th to 18th centuries, but rejected by Roman Church authorities in the famous-infamous Rites Controversy.

Important attempts to develop new forms in the field of catechetics and liturgy, preceding Vatican II, were made by Fr. Johannes Hofinger, S.J., a former China missionary, who started a new catechetical center in Manila, which later developed into the EAPI. In the years preceding Vatican II, Fr. Hofinger organized international Catechetical and Liturgical study weeks in Nijmegen (1959), Eichstätt (1960), Bangkok (1962), Katigondo (1964), and after the Second Vatican Council in Manila (1967) and in Medellín (1968).

In the years preceding Vatican II, ecumenism – that is working for unity among Christian churches and denominations – was not yet an important issue in most Asian mission churches. After all, the missionary activities by Protestant mission groups were seen mostly as nuisance and disturbing the mission activities of the Catholic Church. The antagonistic attitudes among the different Christian churches and groups were so deep, even today, in China and in other Asian countries that Catholicism and Protestantism are treated officially as two completely different religions.

In those days the other religious traditions were seen in the first place as enemies of the Christian mission, and therefore had to be fought and contained. The religions themselves were considered destined, or rather doomed, to be replaced eventually by Christianity. The aim of all missionary activity was defined as *plantatio ecclesiae*, that is, to build up church structures, and was therefore a rather ecclesio-centric enterprise.

The Significance of Vatican II for the Asian Churches

The Contributions of Asian Bishops to Vatican II

The bishops of the Asian mission churches, or of the younger churches as they were called at the time, did not have a great share in the preparatory work and in the actual sessions of Vatican II (1962–1965). The majority of the bishops from Asia still came from the ranks of the foreign missionary societies and not yet from the indigenous clergy. The Council Fathers from the Asian minority churches were neither familiar with one another, nor did they know much about the situation of the Catholic churches in the other Asian countries. The four sessions of the Council, therefore, were precious occasions to get to know each other and to learn about the many aspects in the pastoral, theological, and social tasks the Asian Christians had in common. It was during these sessions that the seed was sown which later in 1970 grew into the Foundation of the FABC. The contributions made by Asian bishops to the different documents of Vatican II were mostly:

- in the field of *liturgy* (opting for the vernacular as liturgical language);
- in *ecumenism* (deploring the scandal of a divided Christianity in the mission fields);
- in *missiology* (insisting on missionary activity as an essential task of every local church);
- in the *theology of religions* (postulating that the Council should deal not only with Judaism, but should also include the general attitude of the Church to the other religious traditions in its consideration, thus preparing the way for the declaration *Nostra Aetate*).

The short characterizations of the central teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam in *Nostra Aetate* (NA) were prepared by experts such as Josef Neuner, S.J. (Hinduism), Heinrich Dumoulin, S.J. (Buddhism), and Georges Anawati, O.P. (Islam).

Bishops from the Asian and African mission countries were also very actively involved in the discussions on the “Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church” (*Ad Gentes*). Council Fathers from Asia, e.g., Bishop Geise of Bogor, Bishop (later Cardinal) Cordeiro from Karachi and Archbishop (later Cardinal) Yupin of Nanking, residing in Taipei (Taiwan), insisted that despite the new positive attitude of the Church to the other religious traditions, the missionary activity of the Church remained a “matter of life and death.” The commitment of the Church to be engaged in development work in order to improve the life situations within the developing nations, as well as the new positive attitude towards the other religions, should not diminish the emphasis on the missionary activity of the Church. Even admitting that the Holy Spirit had been working among the nations prior to the coming of Christian missionaries and continued to be working in the other religions, the Church still remained the ordinary way of salvation. Only in the Church, the “universal sacrament of salvation” could full salvation be found. At the time, the Council Fathers did not succeed in finding a theologically convincing answer to the dilemma combining the necessity of mission with the new theological insight into the salvific function of the other religious traditions. The Missionary Decree (AG 7) simply stated: “Therefore, though God in ways known to Himself can lead those inculpably ignorant of the gospel to that faith, without which it is impossible to please Him (Heb 11:6), yet a necessity lies upon the Church (cf. 1 Cor 9:16), and at the same time a sacred duty, to preach the gospel. Hence missionary activity today as always retains its power and necessity.”

The Foundation of FABC: The Most Important Fruit of Vatican II for the Churches in Asia

The learning process experienced by the Asian bishops during the sessions of the Council finally led to a permanent form cooperating among the Asian bishops on the continental level, resulting in the foundation of the FABC. The Asian bishops had realized that only by continuously cooperating with one another, could the small Asian churches, spread over a geographically vast region, respond to the many challenges posed by the new insights of Vatican II. The Plenary Assembly of the Latin American bishops in Medellin

in 1968, which led to the founding of the *Conferencia Latinoamericana* (CELAM), showed the way. Only two years later in 1970, the Asian bishops used the occasion of the visit of Pope Paul VI in Manila to found the FABC. Although Rome did not encourage any form of inter-ecclesial cooperation on the continental level, the FABC developed in its by now 35 years of existence into an effective organization which is of great importance for all its member or associated member churches in Asia. The plenary assemblies and the various study programs for bishops in the fields of the social apostolate, interreligious dialogue, lay apostolate, theological reflection, and others, have enabled the Asian churches to find common ways in their pastoral activities and theological orientations. What became most influential for the pastoral and theological developments was the formula of the “triple dialogue”:

1. Dialogue with the cultures in the work for inculturation,
2. Dialogue with the religions in the development of a theology of religions, and
3. Dialogue with the poor in the social apostolate for an integral human development.

The Theological Advisory Commission (TAC), today the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC), played an important role for the development of a specific Asian approach in theological methodology and a theology of harmony.

The Implementation of Vatican II in the Asian Local Churches

Vatican II meant for all Asian mission and minority churches a strong impulse to implement the new theological insights on the mission of the Church in the modern world, by interpreting the “signs of the times” in their pastoral, missionary, ecumenical, interreligious and social activities.

Exemplary for other Asian churches was the way the Indian Church tried to implement the insights of Vatican II. Under the leadership of its founding director D. S. Amalorpavadass (1932–1990), the National-Biblical-Liturgical and Catechetical Center (NBCLC) in Bangalore, founded in 1966, became the catalyst for renewal within the Church in India. The many seminars, often continued over several years, offered bishops, priests, religious, and lay people new insights into the bible, catechetics, and the liturgy. The development of an Indian mass (*Indian anaphora*) by making use of oil lamps in

place of candles, by introducing dance, flowers, gestures, chants, and musical instruments taken from the Hindu tradition, was an important contribution towards inculturation of Christian liturgy in India. Local opposition and intervention by Roman authorities, however, stopped further developments. In March 1969 the All India Seminar for a Church in India Today, probably the most important event in recent Church history of India, was held in Bangalore and gave important impulses for the reception of the Council.

In Sri Lanka in 1975, Bishop Leo Nayakkara founded, together with Fr. Michael Rodrigo, O.M.I., an alternative major seminary for his diocese, Badulla, which followed unconventional ways in priestly formation by sending the seminarians to live in the villages and follow, as well as the traditional courses in philosophy and theology, lectures in sociology, management, and anthropology. This experiment of alternative priestly formation, however, ended with the premature death of Bishop Leo Nayakkara in 1985. Michael Rodrigo then developed his new model of Christian-Buddhist "Dialogue of Life on the Village Level." His social engagement for poor farmers angered the big landowners who plotted his killing on 10 November 1987, during the celebration of mass, because he refused to stop his work for the farmers.

Another pioneer in Christian-Buddhist dialogue is the Jesuit Aloysius Pieris, who is director of the study and dialogue center in Tulana. With his contributions towards christology, ecclesiology, theology of religions, and theology of liberation, Pieris has made decisive contributions to an Asian theology.

The Pastoral Institute of the Dominican Fathers in Multan, founded in 1970, contributed most to the reception of Vatican II in Pakistan. For the Catholic Church in Malaysia, Vatican II brought a new understanding of the role of lay people for the mission of the Church. In 1976, the bishops of Malaysia held a month of pastoral reflection, the enlisted "Aggiornamento 1976." All the priests in the country took part in a 30-day retreat to analyze the pastoral situation in the country in order to develop a national pastoral plan. During this period the lay people were left to themselves to organize the life of the parishes and conduct services on Sundays.

The Indonesian bishops implemented the insights of Vatican II by setting up a national office of the bishops' conference with branch offices for liturgy, dialogue, social apostolate, and others. The Indonesian Catholic Congress, held in 1972 in Jakarta, gave an important impulse for the commitment of Catholics in the fields of development. The repeated attempts of the

Indonesian bishops to gain Roman approval for the ordination of catechists (*virī probati*) to the priesthood, however, were refused again and again.

In Asia, the Catholic Church in the Philippines played a leading role in the field of the social apostolate. In 1966, the National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA) was founded, which together with its diocesan branch offices, exercised great influence through its action programs, training courses, and documentation. Individual bishops, but especially the members of male and female religious congregations, started initiatives to work for a Church of the Poor. An important role was played by the many Basic Christian Communities erected in many parts of the country. A prophetic role was played by the Mindanao-Sulu-Pastoral Conference, which every three years since 1971, have brought together bishops, priests, religious, and lay people from the dioceses in Mindanao and Sulu, to discuss common pastoral problems and to develop new strategies.

In Korea, the influence of Vatican II was most decisive in the field of the *social apostolate* and in defending *human rights* against the military dictatorship (1961–1979) in the country.

Members of the Catholic workers movement and of the Catholic farmers organization were at the forefront of resistance. Three prophetic figures played an important role at the time, namely, Bishop Daniel Tji Hak-Soun (1921–1993) of Wonju, Cardinal Stephen Kim Sou-Hwan of Seoul, and the Catholic poet Kim Chi-Ha. They were the strongest voices criticizing the political situation and human rights violations in the country. When Bishop Tji Hak-Soun was arrested in 1974 and detained for seven months, this led to a political awakening within the Catholic Church all over the country. The poems, theater plays, and sketches by the Catholic poet, Kim Chi-Ha severely criticized and ridiculed the policies of the military regime. By the publicity of his literary works, Kim Chi-ha became a national figure of resistance against the regime and a threat to the government. Kim Chi-Ha's writing also became a source of inspiration for "Minjung-Theology," the Korean variant of liberation theology.

In Japan, the impulses of Vatican II were less felt in the field of theology. They led, however, to new developments in the field of interreligious dialogue. Following the lead of foreign missionaries such as Heinrich Dumoulin and Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, several Catholic priests, religious, and lay people were trained in Buddhist Zen monasteries and developed new forms of Christian meditation on the basis of Zen. In Japan the movement "Intermonastic

Dialogue” was founded, which brings together Christian and Buddhist monks and nuns, who mutually share the monastic life of the other tradition for a certain period of time.

Some Characteristics of the Catholic Churches in Asia

Some characteristics of the catholic churches in Asia are:

1. The image of being a “foreign import.” This foreignness results, on the one hand, from the fact that the Asian churches are the result of missionary activity originating from Europe or the United States. The missionary enterprise was at its height during the colonial and imperialistic expansion of Western powers in several Asian countries during the 19th century. As Pope John Paul II admitted, in one of the otherwise rare acknowledgment of faults committed by the Church, some of these missionaries were rather close or even in connivance with the colonial powers. Until today the Catholic churches in some Asian countries – e.g., in the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), in Vietnam, and in India – are burdened with this colonial mortgage. This became obvious, when the pope canonized some of the martyrs who had lost their lives in Vietnam and in China during anti-colonial uprisings in the 18th to 19th centuries.

There is another “foreignness” to be observed in some Asian countries, where the majority of Catholics do not belong to the indigenous population of the country, but recruit themselves from immigrants from neighboring countries. This is the case in Thailand, in Malaysia, in Cambodia, and in a more recent development, also in Japan. In Thailand, the majority of Catholics are of Chinese or Vietnamese origin. In Malaysia, the strongest ethnic group among the Catholics is of Chinese descent. The Church in Cambodia consists mostly of Vietnamese immigrants who live in the country as old or new immigrants. In recent years, the Catholic Church in Japan experienced a vast influx of foreign Catholics who have come from Brazil, the Philippines, and other countries as “overseas workers.” At present the number of foreign Catholics has outnumbered that of the native Japanese Catholics.

2. In Asia, the Catholic communities are small minorities, living and operating within multi-cultural and multi-religious societies. The only exceptions are the Philippines and East Timor. Asian Christians, therefore, have a special responsibility to develop new forms of living together with sisters and brothers of other religious traditions.

3. In Asia, the divisions within Christianity are strongly felt to be obstacles for giving a credible witness to the gospel. The denominationally divided missionary enterprise of the Christian churches resulted *de facto* in an “export of divisions,” perpetuating and multiplying the scandal of the division within Christianity, which happened in the 16th century, but operative till today.

4. What is common to all the Asian churches is that they are still, in various ways, dependent on the mother churches in Europe. There is the financial dependency on yearly subsidies to run different institutions and functions. Even more important is the dependency on the Roman authorities, who control most church activities, and insist on uniform ways of operating according to the centralist rules and regulations set by the Curia.

5. Another characteristic of the Catholic Church in Asia is its high dependency on institutions such as schools, hospitals, orphanages, and social stations. In the eyes of Hindus and Buddhists, the emphasis on social activities in the Christian churches has led to questions as to whether Christianity is really a religion or rather a social movement.¹

The Challenges to the Asian Churches: The Guiding Thesis

The true universality of the Christian faith has still to be discovered and realized. In the past and still today, the Christian faith has been spread in only one culturally and historically limited form of Western Christianity. Vatican II marked a turning point, because the most lasting contribution the Council made was the birth of the Catholic World Church (Karl Rahner), consisting in a union of local churches. Collegiality, among bishops, among national bishops' conferences, and new forms of working together on the level of continental bishops' conferences, such as CELAM for Latin America, Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) for Africa, and FABC for Asia, these conferences signify new ways of being Church and living the communion among the churches. The decades following Vatican

1. A radical Hindu in India expressed this doubt clearly on the cover of his anti-Christian pamphlet. The cover of the book showed a cross. On top of the cross was written “schools,” on the left arm “hospitals,” on the right “orphanages” and on the bottom “social centers.” In the middle of the cross there was a circle within which the signs for “Dollars” (\$), “Pounds” (£) and “Marks” were written. The message was obvious: Christianity operates with foreign money at its center for all kinds of educational, medical, and social facilities.

II, however, saw a return to centralization of most ecclesial functions by the Roman Curia.

The challenge for the Asian churches – and, for that matter, for the churches in Latin America and in Africa as well – will be to break out of the fetters of a mono-cultural Christianity and to develop a distinctive form of Asian Christian living of the gospel and of being church. This will be a wonderful contribution towards a true universality of the Christian faith in a communion of churches, living different forms of Christian life in “unity in diversity.”

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev 2:7). To respond to the challenges posed by the political, economic, social, religious, and cultural situation within Asian societies, the bishops, priests, religious, and lay people have to discern the “signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the gospel.” This task implies that the Church “recognize and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics” (*GS* 4).

India

For a long time, Indian Christians have been challenged by Mahatma Gandhi who was fascinated by the Sermon on the Mount, but who could not find this Spirit alive in the Christian churches. We encounter Ambedkar, who, when he was looking for an alternative to escape the fetters of the caste system, turned to Christianity where he learned that there is no difference between man and woman, between slave and free, because all are one in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:28), but again as in the case of Gandhi, he could not find this deep insight and challenging truth lived by the Christian community he encountered.

In India, there is the witness of Mother Teresa and her sisters who live the spirit of serving the down-trodden, the least, the sick, and the dying. They are criticized because in doing so they are not fighting the causes of poverty, but on the contrary, providing the exploiters with excuses that after all, things are not that bad.

In India, we find the awakening of the Dalit Christians who are the majority in the Church, and who point to Jesus who chose to empty himself to become one of them, and to die on the cross. In response, Christian theologians such as Michael Amaladoss, Samuel Rayan, Sebastian Kappen, and Felix Wilfred have developed a Theology of the Subaltern.

In India, too, we find One Catholic Church, but divided into three rites—a God-given privilege or a scandal? The conflicts and quarrels concerning the question of the Rites and the ecclesial structures have had severe negative consequences for the work of the Catholic Church in India and obscured its witness in the eyes of the general public.

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the Catholic Church is challenged to become an active peacemaker in the struggle between the ethnic groups of the Sinhalese and Tamils. Catholics are to be found in both groups and are therefore, especially called to be bridge-builders.

Why is it that the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka practically ignored the theological work of Aloysius Pieris, a theologian well-known all over Asia and beyond, for his seminal ideas for a specifically Asian theology and his great contributions in the field of Christian-Buddhist dialogue? Pieris learned from his encounter with the Buddhists that the essence of Christianity and its specific contribution consists in the belief that the “poor are the vicars of Christ.” The Christian belief that God, the creator of heaven and earth, had annihilated himself to become a slave (Phil 2:6–11), dying on the cross, being raised by the Father and living on today among the sick, the captives, in short, among all the poor and downtrodden of this earth.

Pakistan

In Pakistan, we have the legacy of Bishop John Joseph who took his life on the steps of the court house building in Lahore, on 9 May 1998, in protest against the ongoing legal harassments against Christians on account of the anti-blasphemy laws. As president of the “Justice and Peace Commission” within the Pakistan Bishops’ Conference, he had led the fight against the anti-blasphemy laws with great intensity. The death of Bishop John Joseph was met with shock, bewilderment, and questioning not only by people in Pakistan but also from among Catholics worldwide. Bishop John Joseph remains a controversial personality. The violent death he chose for himself contrasts strikingly with the peaceful way the bishop always conducted his work for human rights. What is the challenge in this witness who, in his fight against the discriminatory blasphemy laws, took his own life in an act of protest and deep despair. What is the Spirit telling us here?

Bangladesh

The small Catholic community in Bangladesh is challenged by the growth of radical Islamist groups, who, more and more often, resort to violence and terror. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church continues in the effort to implement the national pastoral plan, promulgated in 1985, and which identified interreligious dialogue as an essential task for the Catholic Church in Bangladesh.

An exceptional example of a “dialogue of life” is the life and work of the Maryknoll Missionary Bob McCahill, who, for the past several years, has developed his own form of priestly ministry by living among the poor, in a small hut, serving the poor and sick in their everyday problems and vicissitudes in several cities in Bangladesh.² The incentive for this unusual and unconventional form of Christian apostolate as presence came from the late Bishop Joaquin Rosario of Chittagong (+1996), who, in his charismatic exercise of the office of bishop, opened new ways to promote interreligious dialogue in the country.

Indonesia

When looking for a charismatic and prophetic figure from the Indonesian Catholic Church I’ve chosen Jusuf Bilyarta Mangunwijaya (1929–1999), who combined the vocation to the priesthood with working as an architect, novelist, social worker, and theologian.

As a young priest he studied architecture at the Technical University in Aachen. After his return to Indonesia, Mangunwijaya built several churches in a style which incorporated many elements of Javanese architecture and mythology. In a partly autobiographical novel *The Weaverbirds*,³ Mangunwijaya described the turbulent times of the independence struggle which have been so influential in shaping the national identity of the country. Also in the field of theology, Mangun, as he was popularly called, developed original ideas regarding the concept of God and especially the mystery of the Trinity. This he did, not as professor of theology in one of the major seminaries, but in private circles, where he felt unrestrained by the fetters of orthodoxy, but could freely develop his ideas. Mangun became a well-known public figure, especially for this social commitment to homeless people and unemployed workers in

2. See Bob McCahill, *Dialogue of Life: A Christian Among Allah's Poor* (New York, 1996).

3. The Indonesian title is *Burung-burung Manyar*. A German translation was published by Horlemann editions (Unkel-Bad Honnef 1993).

Yogyakarta. In 1998, Mangunwijaya was awarded the “Kalyanakaretya-Price,” a national award for outstanding achievements, by President Habibie and in acknowledgment of his life work, as well as for the social work done by the Catholic minority in the country.

The challenge of Mangun’s legacy for the Catholic Church in Indonesia consists in prodding Indonesian Catholics to become fully involved in the life of their nation, to make the Catholic faith more attractive for their fellow country men and women by respecting the customs and traditions of the land. At the same time they should be attentive to the needs of the poor and disadvantaged by becoming truly a Church for the poor.

Philippines

In turning to the Philippines, I would like to recall the memory and the legacy of three personalities who were involved in interreligious dialogue and gave their lives for it.⁴ The first is Bishop Bienvenido Tuted (1931–1986), the first bishop of the Prelature of Marawi, who made important contributions to interreligious dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims alike.⁵ Further I would like to recall the witness of Bishop Benjamin de Jesus, O.M.I., of the Apostolic Prefecture of Jolo, who was killed in front of his cathedral on 4 February 1997, and whose memory remains alive as a reminder to abstain from violence, and as a sign of hope that his martyrdom will bring fruit in interreligious understanding and living together. On 20 May 1992, Fr. Salvatore Carzedda was shot riding in a car in the center of the city of Zamboanga. Fr. Carzedda, a missionary of the Milan Mission Society, was a leading member in the Silsilah-Movement, founded in 1984 in Zamboanga by Fr. Sebastiano D’Ambra (PIME). The success of the Silsilah-Movement in bringing about peace between the Christian and Muslim communities obviously did not please the radical Muslim groups in Mindanao.

All three personalities were engaged in interreligious dialogue and died for it. They leave us with the challenge to continue in the work of dialogue in

4. I could have chosen other important personalities such as Cardinal Jaime Sin, Bishop Antonio Fortich of Bacolod, or Bishop Julio Labayan of the Prelature of Infanta.

5. I remember Bishop Tuted for his kindness and openness and for being a pioneer of dialogue of life. Bienvenido Tuted, the gentle bishop, vanished in a plane accident but left a legacy, that engaging in dialogue with Muslims is a duty and a privilege for the Church. I met him first at the *Journées Romaines* in the early 80s in *Frascati*, where he spoke about the right of indigenous people in Mindanao to own their land. It is their traditional hereditary land which they had every right to defend against newcomers from outside, who can obtain legal documents and deeds, thus claiming their private ownership.

the face of violence by radical groups, who make use of religions to sow discord and hatred. After all, there is no alternative to dialogue, if we want to bring about peace and harmony among members of different religions.

Japan

The personality I have chosen from Japan is neither a bishop nor a theologian but Endo Shusaku, the well-known writer and novelist, who all through his life struggled with the problem of how to integrate being Japanese and Catholic in his identity. In his works, especially in the famous novel *Silence* (*chinmoku*), he speaks about Japan as the “swamp” which swallows up the seed of the gospel and changes it. One of the characters in his novel puts the annoying and perturbing question: Who on earth gave the missionaries the right to come to Japan, preach the gospel, and make converts from among the Japanese, who then were persecuted by the political authorities for adhering to a foreign faith? Was it really necessary for them to lose their lives in the hot springs, at the cross, hanging in the pit?

And today, what is the mission of the Catholic Church in Japan? Is the challenge today for Japanese Catholics that they have to respond to becoming a minority group within the Catholic community living in Japan, where the Catholic immigrants who came as migrant workers constitute the majority?

Mongolia

The present Catholic Church in Mongolia is a sign of the Spirit working today in Asia and awakening people to start out on the venture to present the Gospel to a people who have not yet been reached, to build up a completely new Church, and to be of service to the society in the country. When the Belgian Scheut missionaries started their missionary work, there were no indigenous Mongolians among the few Catholics living in the country, who were mostly employees of international firms or embassies. After this modest start the number of Mongolians who come for instruction and baptism has been increasing steadily. Since there was no church building, the first masses and religious ceremonies were held in a rented hall of a theatre. In May 1976 the first church was built in Ulan Bator to serve as chapel for the missionary center. A center for street children and another for mentally retarded children was started in Ulan Bator. Later, the Missionaries of Charity opened a center for homeless people. Sisters of the Congregation of St. Paul de Chartres are running a Montessori kindergarten and elementary schools in Ulan Bator and in Zun Mod. In 1998, Fr. Wenceslao Padilla, C.I.C.M., was appointed to

become the first Apostolic Prefect of the self-governing mission (*sui iuris*) of Ugra (Ulan Bator). The small and modest Catholic community in Mongolia, therefore, is a sign that the Spirit is reaching new people today.

Peoples' Republic of China (PRC)

The Catholics in the Peoples' Republic of China have given a wonderful example of survival in the midst of severe persecution, and of handing on the faith in adverse circumstances. Here, I would like to recall the example of the Jesuit Dominic Tang Yiming, Apostolic Administrator of Kanton, who, after refusing to cooperate with the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, was arrested in 1958 and kept in prison for 22 years, without ever having been formally charged or condemned by a court. When Dominic Tang was finally released in 1980, he was re-installed as Bishop of Kanton with the approval of the government. But when, in 1981, Pope John Paul II named Dominic Tang as Archbishop of Kanton, the Chinese government reacted harshly and removed him from his post. Dominic Tang then took residence in Hong Kong, where he spent his last years in exile, working tirelessly for the Church in mainland China until his death in June 1995.⁶

The other notable “sign of the times” is the spectacular growth of Chinese Christianity, astonishingly, mostly ignored outside China. We constantly hear about the persecutions of Catholics of the underground churches, but rarely are we told that the Christian churches in China are experiencing a constant growth, that some even spoke about a “Christianity fever” which can be observed in China today.

The most urgent task for the Catholics in China is the reconciliation between the Catholics of the open Church with those of the underground Church. The challenge for the Catholic Church in China is to respond to the expectations by those numerous Chinese who are disappointed by the ideological disaster of the Communist Party and who are looking for a new orientation. The present economic boom in China leaves many people on the sidelines. They cannot compete with those for whom “making money” (*fa-zai*) has become the sole meaning of their lives. Can the Catholics show that there is more to life than economic, financial, and social success?

6. Cf. The obituary of Bishop Dominic Tang Yingming (1908–1995), in *China Heute* 14, no. 5 (1995): 130.

The Challenges Today

Secular Challenges

Asian Churches thus face several challenges today.

1. The Global Market and the economic developments in some Asian countries pose enormous challenges for all Asian churches. The often spectacular economic growth, observed in some Asian countries, is accompanied by a growing poverty on an even larger scale. What contributions can the Catholic Church make to alleviate these harsh consequences? Which alternatives, which values, and principles, which alternative orientation can the Catholic Church present to its members and beyond the narrow realm of the Church, to the societies in Asia, confronted with widespread materialism, consumerism, and the idolatry of Mammon?

2. The other major challenge for the churches in Asia is that they take seriously the obligation to become a Church for the poor by living and implementing the fundamental option for the poor. In Asian societies, but also in the Catholic churches in Asia, we encounter big differences in the appreciation or rejection of poverty, and vastly different attitudes towards wealth and economic prosperity. In countries with strong traditions of monasticism, such as in Theravada-Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Thailand, as well as in the Hindu Sanyasi-tradition in India, freely chosen poverty is held to be a religious value. In East Asia, however, especially among Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese, material affluence is valued as a blessing, and to strive for it is honorable, whereas poverty, especially poverty imposed by economic circumstances, as well as the freely chosen poverty of monks and nuns, is not only unappreciated but rather despised.

3. How do we respond to the revolution in the communication media of radio, TV and especially of the Internet, which brings about far-reaching changes in social life, in the life of families, in the political, ideological, cultural, and religious fields? Already, several decades ago, the Catholic churches in Asia set up Radio Veritas. UCAN News is covering events in the churches and reporting about them. But the vast field of the Internet is still unexplored. The opportunities which these new communication media provide for evangelization should be seen as a challenge.

4. There is also the challenge of communalism and fundamentalist violence. In recent years violence, in the name of religions, ideologies, and ethnical belonging, has spread worldwide. In many countries in Asia, the

Catholic Church finds itself in the midst of struggles which are caused by communalist and fundamentalist ideologies. The Asian minority churches might seem too small to be effective agents of peace and understanding. But in responding to the gospel message of reconciliation, the Catholics in Asia are called to engage in the work of bringing peace and understanding to their societies.

5. Another challenge is the witnessing in the face of restrictions of religious freedom. Religious freedom is one of the essential human rights which in Asia is threatened in many countries such as North Korea, the PRC, Laos, Vietnam, and several others. Many Asian churches are proud of their legacy of being churches of martyrs. To live and witness to the gospel in the time of persecution has been, and still is, one of the great challenges for many Asian churches.

Theological Challenges

1. Theology in the service of justice, liberation, and emancipation, and community building is one of the foremost challenges to Christian theologians in Asia. The theology of inculturation has been criticized and declared to be a “spent force” (as Felix Wilfred would put it), because with its focus on culture – and for that matter often the high culture of the ruling class – it does not include the reality of the exploited and suffering people. Based on a deeper understanding of the mystery of the incarnation, theologians are challenged to express Christ’s identification with the least and downtrodden, in forms of a liberative theology, in the service of justice, which has been called subaltern theology.

The task of developing a liberative theology also includes working for the emancipation of women, often still discriminated against, in many Asian societies. The emergence of strong groups of feminist theologians challenge the hierarchical Church to allot them room to contribute to new forms of being Church, where women have their rightful places and roles.

2. In response to religious and ideological pluralism, Asian theologians are called to make their own contributions to a theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, by raising new questions, and finding new answers from their lived experience of religious pluralism, and their intimate knowledge of the other traditions. Claiming these traditions as part of their own cultural and religious heritage, they are in the unique position to find “from inside,” so to speak, new approaches and answers to the problem of the salvific significance of other religions, their holy books, and holy founders.

3. Becoming truly local churches is the challenge to develop from so-called “Bonsai-churches,” replicas of Western Church models, to truly Asian local churches. Faced with growing communalism and fundamentalism, Asian churches are challenged to shed their image of being “foreign implants” and to become communities which feel at home, and which are accepted by the other communities in the country as full-fledged and respected members.

4. Developing minority churches and their mission is probably the most challenging theological issue for most Asian Churches – the Philippines is and remains a special case – and to consider their mission and role for the Asian societies. Nearly all Asian churches have in common that they are small minorities, mostly only between 1–3% (e.g., India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Japan, China), or only slightly higher (e.g., Sri Lanka, Vietnam, South Korea). Realistically, weighing their potential and the religious landscape surrounding them, they cannot hope to be able to make great strides in converting their fellow citizens to become Christians in the near or even far future. The question which Vatican II left unanswered, namely, how to combine the acknowledgment of the salvific function of other religions with the “great command” to bring the gospel to all peoples, poses a great challenge to Asian theologians. What is the relationship between interreligious dialogue and mission? How do we view the problem of conversion – so sensitive in many Asian countries – from a theological perspective, in multi-religious Asia?

5. Last but not least, I would like to point out another challenge to which Asian theologians are called to respond for the good of the universal Church, namely, witnessing to the mystery of God by developing new forms of a negative theology, thereby reacting and correcting a Western theology, which seems to be too confident that dogmatic concepts are capable of explaining the mystery of God. In Asia, we find a widespread strong sense for the mystery and an awareness of the limitations of human language and philosophical concepts, to express the deepest reality of God-world-human person. This insight finds its expression in a deep sense of awe for the mystery, accompanied with distrust in dogmatic formulation, which in the Western dogmatic tradition, is expressed in the form of Greek philosophical concepts. Dogmatic statements claim to be valid for all peoples and places. In Asian philosophical and religious traditions, we encounter the more modest position of distrusting the faculties of the human mind, to penetrate the mystery of the Divine and of human existence. Daoism claims that “The Tao which can be named, is not the real Tao.” And in Indian philosophy we have the tradition of the *Advaita* school which speaks of “neither-nor” (*neti, neti*) to express the impossibility of human language understanding the ultimate essence of being.

Asian Christian theologians, therefore, have a sharper sense of the hermeneutical problems of the many languages and cultures than does Western theology. From their own experience, Asian theologians know only too well that certain terminologies and concepts from Western languages cannot adequately be translated into Asian language games, not because the translators are incapable, but because certain structures in Asian languages do not allow adequate translation of many philosophical and theological concepts taken from Greek-Roman traditions.

In Asian Christian theology the category of experience (*anubhava*) plays a great role. To give experience such an eminent place is not meant in the first place as an anti-thesis to the noetic aspect of divine revelation. It really comes from the tradition of meditation and immersion in the mystery of ultimate reality. The experience of “enlightenment” (*satori* or *samadhi*) leads deeper into silence and is not open for verbal communication. In Asian theology, therefore, the symbols, stories, and myths are used to break out of the fetters of the philosophical-dogmatic formulations of Western theology.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GEORG EVERS studied philosophy and theology in Munich and Münster in Germany, and in Tokyo, Japan. From 1979 to 2001, he was head of the Asia Desk of the Institute of Missiology of Missio, in Aachen, Germany, and editor of *Theology in Context*, a bibliography guide to Third World Theology. He has actively participated in many theological conferences within the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). His many publications are in the field of contextual theologies, interreligious dialogue, theology of religions, and Asian Church history.